

The Imaginal Pattern Studies Method

An overview

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The prompts in this guide are for personal inquiry. They are not an assessment or a treatment. If an image becomes overwhelming, you can end the exercise and seek company or support rather than continue alone.

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The Imaginal Pattern Studies Method

Imaginal Pattern Studies is a method of self-observation through a series of imagined experiences. Each study follows one subject or feeling through a set of creative prompts. Work through them in order, keep your responses, then read them together. Look for where your attention went, what you assumed, and how that shaped what you did next.



Begin with the scene you're given

Each study explores one subject or human experience through a series of imagined exercises. Take the prompts one at a time. Allow yourself to settle into the scene before you begin. Just for a few moments. Then, don't think too much, just write what happens, or draw the scene or record it aloud. Don't second guess what comes through.

Part of the joy of this work is to allow your mind to wander into what could or might happen. It's also about being curious and true. Let go and explore. No one will read or hear or see these responses but you. These aren't meant for sharing. They are only meant for you to discover you. Let yourself go to the unfamiliar, the weird, the strange or somewhere you would seldom choose to go.

A prompt to try

Think of someone you love. Name them. That someone has just gone into another room and closed the door behind them. You hear the latch catch. Spend the next few minutes on your side of the door. Write what happened and what you do next.

Begin wherever you find yourself when you hear the latch. If a line of dialogue or an action comes to you, use it and give yourself time to respond. You may feel something before you have words for it, or know quite clearly what you do next without seeing the room in any detail. Start there. Give yourself about 7 minutes for the response.

Your response

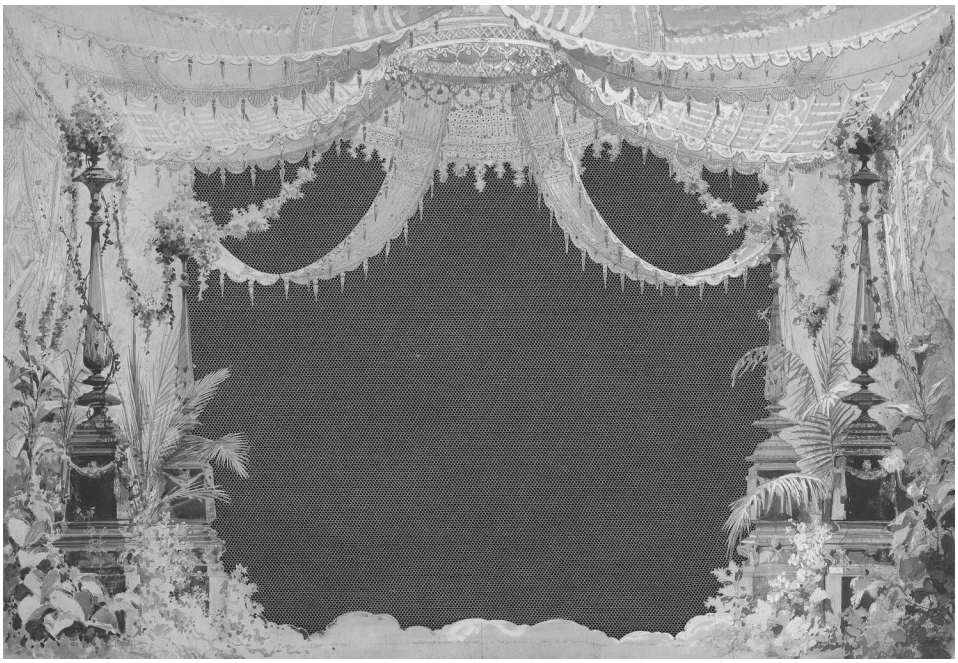
Keep your first response

Sometimes a prompt gives you a further instruction, record your response to the first part before continuing to the next portion of the prompt.

Keep the prompt with what you wrote. If you work in a sketchbook or think more easily aloud, keep the drawing or recording and jot down a phrase you'll recognize later so you can reference this response.

A Study has a collection of prompts. Do not rush to complete all of the prompts in one sitting. Do one at a time with some space between. Perhaps an hour, maybe days. The idea is not to rush, but to sit with your response. You may find that you want to return to the same prompt and answer again. If that happens, record your second (or third, or fourth) response. Keep them all together.

Continue the prompts in a Study until you're guided to start reviewing your responses. By then you'll have several scenes of your own to consider.



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Read one response closely

Choose a response from your collection. Read it closely. Mark the first line where you did something that interests you. You can circle or underline it. It might be the words you gave somebody else, an object you kept coming back to, or the moment you started to leave and changed your mind. If there was something you wanted to say and found yourself writing around, mark where you changed the subject. Write items in the margins. Take notes on your audio recording. Write to the drawing you created.



Unknown author, Bühnenbild: Ansicht Bühnenbild, Felsen und Bäume an einem See. Architekturmuseum der TU Berlin, Inv. Nr. TBS 520,661. CC0 1.0.

An example

One possible response to the closed door prompt

> *The person I love: My partner.*
>
> *I'm halfway down the stairs when it occurs to me that if he opens the door and finds me gone, he'll think I'm angry. The children are downstairs getting their homework out. I go back up two steps and sit where he'll see me if he comes out.*

In this example, a line of interest is: "I go back up two steps."

When observing responses, three terms can help you read a moment like this. Use whichever one gives you a way into your own scene.

Move

Name the action you can point to. Here the writer starts downstairs, turns back and chooses to sit on a step within sight of the door and wait. She did not say, "I waited for him." But her actions did.

Field

Describe the situation as it took shape. The prompt asked you to name a person you love. The field then is set at the start as relational. The writer chose "My Partner." This further clarifies the field as an intimate partner. The prompt then gave you the scenario "the closed door." The writer added the children (now the field is identified as a home), the homework (a routine evening) and the possibility that going downstairs would look like anger (emotional field). That last detail is important to note. An expectation the writer supplied now influences where they sit.

Want

As an observer of your response, explore what you hoped would happen, including anything else you wanted at the same time. This writer may have wanted to be there when the door opened. They may also have wanted the evening with the children or another adult's help downstairs. Read the line again and see which possibility you recognize. You can leave this as an open-ended question.

Taken together, these details describe your *position*. Where did you put yourself in relation to the people or possibilities in the scene? What did you take to be yours to do? Include what it felt like to take that position. You might have written dialogue for this prompt and when you reply to the partner, on a reread, your face grew warm when you read it. You can learn something from recognizing this is an imagined scene, you gave them those words.

Compare your responses across the study

At the end of the collection of study prompts, do the same observation with the remaining scenes. Again, there is no need to rush. It can take days. You may break between then and realize that prompt 1 and prompt 5 are very similar. Over time lay the passages out together. Group them if they bring up the same actions, same responses, same ideas. If you don't know where to start, you can begin with a *move*, a feeling or a wish that appears more than once. Similar words can mean different things in different scenes. Very different actions can express much the same concern.

Name what repeats

Take the writer on the stairs. In another exercise they have three uninterrupted hours alone. Before they go out, they leave a note on the kitchen table. "Went for coffee. Back by four." Put that line beside "I go back up two steps." What repeats? In one scene they stay and in the other they go, yet both times they make sure someone will know where to find them. That observation is specific enough for the writer to recognize the next time it happens.

Find where the pattern changes

Look for a scene in which the same response was possible and you did something else. In our example, there might be a third scene where our writer goes out and leaves no note. This time they've agreed to meet their partner at home for dinner. The writer could consider whether having a plan made the difference. Or maybe they may have been so pleased to be going somewhere that it never occurred to them to account for themselves.

Compare what the prompts asked with what you supplied or added. You can also look at what you wanted (to write) versus what you actually write. What did you avoid? Did you keep writing in the same field(s)? What happened if a field changed? Did you change?

Each study will guide you with questions to consider, but as you complete more prompts, you can add your own.

Ask what the response does for you

Return to the feeling in each prompt. Note what you *remember feeling* most clearly. Possible examples from our writer: Resenting my partner for shutting the door instead of talking. The uncertainty about who needs me most, the relationship with my partner or my children. The conflict of wanting to just go on with my night.

As you look across exercises are there repeated emotions around the same or different actions? What is the root emotion beneath each scene? Let the differences between your scenes help you decide how far an observation holds or doesn't hold. There are no "right" answers.

Write the pattern in your own words, with room for the exception. For this writer that might be, "When I can't tell what somebody wants from me, I make sure they can find me. When we've made a plan, I'm happy to go out and enjoy the time." A later scene may give you reason to revise the sentence.

Sometimes you won't see a pattern across responses. Just put them aside. Over time, you might realize what you *didn't* write or record was actually the pattern. What you were afraid to admit or what you didn't want to see about yourself or a situation.

Notes to return to

Explore another choice

Choose one moment for any response you'd like to experience again. You might be curious about something you needed, a possibility you dismissed, or a part of the scene you enjoyed and would like to spend more time in. Keep your original response and start a new version at that moment. Change one thing so you can see what difference it makes.

Return to the moment before you acted

In the scene on the stairs, the writer could go down the last few steps and sit with the children. Let the door upstairs stay closed long enough to notice what that does with their attention. Do they hear what the children are saying, or are they listening for the latch? Put the two versions side by side. Going downstairs may turn out to be easy. Being willing to let someone wonder where they are may be the part that takes a little practice.

You can also go back to something you wanted more of. Suppose you were given a sewing room for the afternoon and imagined making a red sequined dress. You spent a page writing about the dress, then at the end of the prompt you put it away because you couldn't think where you'd wear it. Pick up the scene just before you put the dress in the closet. Give yourself somewhere to wear it and see what you do. Was it the making you enjoyed? The prospect of being seen? You can follow what interests you further than everyday circumstances usually allow.

Recognize it in ordinary life

Choose a familiar occasion when you might notice the same response. For our example, if the writer is used to waiting for others, they may choose to look at the next time they have an afternoon free. They could pay attention to the moment they reach for the phone to tell someone where they'll be. The underlying questions are: Is there an arrangement you want to honor? What want or desire do you have that you are not asking for? Give yourself time to hear your own answer.

A study can also leave you with a feeling you recognize for the first time, or a clearer sense of what matters to you. Keep the particular scene that brought it into focus. It gives you somewhere to return when you want to explore that part of your inner life again.

A contemplative practice that can deepen your connection with your inner life.

Part of the pleasure of this practice is finding out what goes on in your inner life when you give it some time and privacy. You may begin with something that troubles you and find, several prompts later, that what interests you most is something you enjoyed.

These studies give you a way to spend time with possibilities and, most importantly, with yourself. You can say the words you've carried for years and discover how it feels to hear yourself say them. You can give yourself endless room to discover who you are and follow a wish far enough to find out which part of it you enjoy. An imagined encounter leaves the history and structure of your life intact. What it adds is an experience of your own, one you can return to as your understanding of what happened deepens. You may also see more clearly what you still want or what you could have if you made a change.

Over time, you may invent prompts of your own because a detail stays with you and you'd like to see where it goes. That curiosity is worth exploring. The longer you spend with your own responses, the more familiar you may become with the things you care about enough to keep studying, including the ones you've scarcely admitted to yourself.



Imaginal Pattern Studies gives you *experiences you can both have and examine.*

Further reading

The studies draw on C. G. Jung's work with active imagination and the image work of James Hillman and Yoram Kaufmann. For research on how imagined situations can evoke feeling, see the study by Emily Holmes and colleagues.

C. G. Jung, The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, paragraphs 400–401.

James Hillman, An Inquiry into Image.

Yoram Kaufmann, The Way of the Image.

Emily A. Holmes and colleagues, The Causal Effect of Mental Imagery on Emotion Assessed Using Picture-Word Cues.